

The Turning Point

Michael Dennis
Carbondale Community High School, Carbondale
Teacher: Nick Weshinsky

The lives and careers of two opponents can be considerably different. This was true for Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas. Abraham Lincoln started off as a lawyer and then moved towards a political career. He failed at his first attempt at political office by losing a campaign for Illinois General Assembly. Then, two years later, he won the election for state legislature. Stephen A. Douglas was born in the state of Vermont. He settled in Jacksonville, Illinois, at the age of 20. There he was a teacher and studied law. By 1842, he was a leader of the Democratic Party. Lincoln's and Douglas' paths first crossed in 1854 because of the Kansas-Nebraska Act which was proposed by Douglas and Lincoln came back to politics to fight the act. Lincoln was then instrumental in creating the Republican Party. Then in 1858, Lincoln wanted Douglas' Senate seat pitting Lincoln as an up-and-coming politician for the Republican Party against Douglas as the incumbent Democratic Senator. This led to the famous Lincoln-Douglas Debates. At the fifth Lincoln-Douglas Debate, at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, both Lincoln and Douglas were affected by this debate. They both began to take on a different tone and, as for Lincoln, it meant the stroke he needed to get in line for the presidency.

The Galesburg debate was hotly contested between the "Little Giant" and Abraham Lincoln. After Galesburg, both "debaters took on a new tone, with candidates addressing matters of principle." Douglas became even fiercer as a debater while Lincoln continued with his well-known calm, cool approach. Despite his approach, Lincoln's speeches became more vigorous in their meaning. Before Galesburg, both Lincoln and

Douglas gave arguments that were not offensive to the other's supporters, but still said enough to try and win their vote, all the while still meaning something to their own supporters. Beginning with Galesburg and continuing on to Quincy and Alton, they started to take more of a stance on issues and "moral questions were given prolonged and revealing attention," according to one historian. Their speeches revealed that which they actually felt and which they believed. It was near the end of their campaigns and both needed to get as many votes and support as possible. They had to say and show what they truly believed in. According to Douglas, however, Lincoln "in one part of the State he stood up for Negro equality, and in another part for political effect, discarded the doctrine and declared that there always must be a superior and inferior race." Previous to the Galesburg debate, they said what was expected to be said depending on the part of the state they were in. The Galesburg debate was the turning point in terms of what they were saying and they got much more personal and revealed their true beliefs. Unfortunately for Douglas, he started saying what he truly believed in an abolitionist town that wholeheartedly supported Lincoln. Eyewitness accounts tell that "it was a losing fight there for him in that Abolition town and he knew, he felt it." Douglas tried hard to prove to the pro-Lincoln crowd that he deserved their vote.

Douglas was a Democrat and he supported slavery, even though, he was not as vigorous in fighting to keep slavery as much as the other Democratic leaders would have liked him to be. The immediate question in the Galesburg debate and in the parties "was whether or not slavery should be allowed in the Kansas frontier." He did not sign onto a proslavery amendment for Kansas. He believed in popular sovereignty, which is the view that each state should be able to choose if it wants to have slavery. This view made the

Democratic leaders angry, so Douglas spent a lot of time defending himself on that issue. Nonetheless, he still believed that African Americans should never become citizens and never get equal rights. Lincoln disagreed with and found faults in what Douglas and the Democratic Party were saying about African Americans. Douglas tried to make Lincoln out to be a wholehearted abolitionist, which he was, to try and get the votes of those Southerners that supported slavery. However, Lincoln was careful not to come out and say he was an abolitionist, and that he supported full rights and equality for African Americans. He did speak “more strongly about the moral evil of slavery than he had in earlier debates.” However, he did state that the Declaration of Independence ensured certain freedoms for everyone. All the while, Lincoln kept his composure and planned out his arguments. They were “finely woven arguments, consistent, continuous, logical, irresistible in its force,” according to Emanuel Hertz. On the other hand, Douglas continued to fight with the same words and phrases that he used in all of the previous debates and was overly vigorous in his attacks. It was all he could do to survive the Galesburg debate.

After the Galesburg debate, Lincoln and Douglas battled in words twice more, at Alton and Quincy. Once all the debates were over, the Illinois legislature was called and voted on who they wanted to represent Illinois as its senator. They returned Douglas to his position even though it was by a much smaller margin than was thought he might get before the debates. Douglas may have won that battle, but Lincoln won the war between the two because in 1860 Lincoln won the presidential race against Douglas. It was the Galesburg debate “where Lincoln began his career of leadership triumphant,” wrote Hertz. Lincoln started to say what he wanted and needed to say instead of saying what

sounded the best and offended the least number of people. Lincoln, it seemed, realized his potential and that he had to take a stand on some things to get places in politics. The Galesburg debate was the place where Lincoln took a stand against slavery and said what needed to be said to help move a nation against slavery. [From "Fifth Debate."

<<http://www.nps.gov/archive/liho/debate5.htm>> (Sept. 27, 2007); Emanuel Hertz, *Abraham Lincoln At the Climax of the Great Lincoln-Douglas Joint Debate in Galesburg, Illinois*; Harold Holzer, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*; R. D. Monroe, "Lincoln's Biography." 2000. <<http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/biography7.html>> (Sept. 6, 2007); Hermann R. Muelder, *Why Galesburg and Knox College Were on Lincoln's Side*; and *The Lincoln-Douglas Debate, Galesburg, Illinois, October 7th, 1858*. As Recalled by E. S. Willcox.]